

13/12/2004 22:49:00

- ← Contexts: Understanding Bourdieu
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- ← Intellectual and Theoretical Contexts
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- ← Social and cultural theory comprised of debates about kinds of determinism (in various kinds of materialist theory) and analyses of social behavior and class systems.
- ← Legacy of Marx, and adoption/reception/integration of Foucault and Derrida in the academic field (especially in US humanities).
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- ← Bourdieu stresses social structures as conditions of possibility per se, as pre-existing conditions for reproduction of social structures. In this view, people are schooled in the competencies of their social class (middle class and upper-middle professional class received as the norm) and in the social positions available to them.
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- ← While being socialized, individuals also believe in their self-interested actions. But perceived self-interests are very consistent along class lines, allowing the argument that people are socialized into the kinds of discourses to use to talk about themselves, their identities, the goals, and about their views of money, culture, and education..
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- ← Compare Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (in *The Constitution of Society*): how social agents reproduce social structures.
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- ← Sociological analysis from cuts against the grain of American approaches to education, culture, and art.
- ← Americans still mainly hold a (naive) "voluntarism," a belief in individual human agency as the primary social force.
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- ← There is a deeply felt need to preserve human agency for the ability to create and motivate collective action toward social change.

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← In art, music, culture, Americans often cling to post-Romantic beliefs in the individual "genius" who transcends history, time, and social context, and have a hard time considering the social, historical, and economic position and positioning of what gets produced as culture.

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← Education as a form of social reproduction

← Bourdieu studied French schools (state institutions) and the structure of the social class system.

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← Theory of "symbolic violence:" schools, colleges, curricula serve to reproduce middle class subjects and accommodate them to the "given" structures of cultural capital.

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← Cultural Capital

← Classical distinctions between use value and exchange value:

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← Use value traditionally seen as the immediate, uncomplex, transparent satisfaction of need (raise your cattle for your own use, buy bread to eat right away). Economists traditionally bracket off use value as not belonging to economics.

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← Capitalist market economies are based on exchange value: producing things for a marketplace (consumption). Commodities are defined by exchange value, value created by exchange for profit (make a car, sell it, its value to the producer is only the difference between costs of production and market price; publish a book, sell it, ditto).

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← Cultural capital involves complex uses that play out over time and can't be accounted for as simple commodities (value as what is created in one-time exchange).

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← Commodities as such usually can be exchanged at any legal moment, and all moments in a marketplace are basically equal, as if happening at the same time.

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← Cultural capital is used, received, acquired, experienced, and recognized in *concrete time*, not in the abstract time of economics (time value of money, rates of return, APRs, etc.) or in an abstract synchrony (the totality of underlying structures and forces in a society posited as operating at given social-historical moment, as mapped by structuralists).

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← It takes time to learn, observe, interpret, get schooling and credentials, or make, buy, and sell art. The ability to participate in cultural capital is acquired in the concrete time of inhabiting institutions (family, schools, organizations). Learning and experiencing cultural transactions in daily concrete time distinguishes cultural capital from economic capital, though cultural capital enters the marketplace of value and is fungible (can be exchanged for or take the place of economic capital). Cultural capital is thus formed through a nexus of accrued social contents, artifacts, monuments.

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← With cultural capital, an economic exchange (paying college tuition, buying a book, paying for a museum membership, buying a work of art) sets in motion a series of uses, some symbolic, some fungible for other capital, that are practiced in concrete social time.

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← Art experience and aesthetics contextualized as cultural capital and class-conditioned competence:

← Instead of the grounds of aesthetic pleasure in the individual, Bourdieu turns to the conditions of its possibility in socialization, access to the categories of art in the social hierarchy (access to cultural capital), and the demystification of the art experience in conditioned and predictable responses.

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← Method of converting an intentional sign into a cultural symptom (shared by other cultural critics on the left and right).

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← Bourdieu proposes a full-scale reduction of "aesthetic experience" to social "fields" (arenas of social and economic interaction), which, in this model and from empirical research, account for most responses to art (fine arts, music, literature) across the social classes. In other words, our private, "subjective" responses to art are also fairly predictable according to our level of competence, knowledge, prior experience, and social class values.

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← Can art works or education be considered as commodities (equivalent items for exchange)?

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← Role of institutional valorization: governments and schools

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← Summing up the usefulness of the theoretical model in his book *Reproduction*, Bourdieu states that the book

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← [proposes] a model of the social mediations and processes which tend, behind the backs of the agents engaged in the school system --teachers, students, and their parents--and often against their will, to ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations and to stamp pre-existing differences in inherited cultural capital with a meritocratic seal of academic consecration by virtue of the special symbolic potency of the *title* (credential). Functioning in the manner of a huge classificatory machine which inscribes changes within the purview of the structure, the school helps to make and to impose the legitimate exclusions and inclusions which form the basis of the social order.... And, in societies which claim to recognize individuals only as equals in right, the educational system and its modern nobility only contribute to disguise, and thus legitimize, in a more subtle way the arbitrariness of the distribution of powers and privileges which perpetuates itself through socially uneven allocation of school titles and degrees. (*Reproduction*, x)

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  - ← Schools operate upon preexisting social inequalities and preexisting unequal distribution of cultural capital.
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    - ← Schools "[legitimize] the reproduction of the social hierarchies by transmuting them into academic hierarchies." (*Reproduction*, 153).
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      - ← Model for analyzing U.S. higher education hierarchies from technical colleges and community colleges to elite-tier Ivy League and private universities.
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        - ← What is the value of a "college degree"? What about the hierarchy in prestige and symbolic value of a degree in the marketplace (Mississippi State vs. Princeton)?
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          - ← Social class validation with some mobility in seemingly meritocratic system. "Equal opportunities" do not equate with a student's origins or outcomes.
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            - ← Does learning create a different structure in the system? Or does it operate at lower levels of prestige and fails to reproduce cultural capital by institutional socialization into the "degreed social class".
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← "Pierre Bourdieu"

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← Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) worked in or influenced a remarkably broad range of disciplines, including Philosophy, Anthropology, Education, Sociology, and Politics, as well as Literary and Cultural Theory. At his death, it was his contribution to political theory that most caught obituarists' eyes: in the 1990s Bourdieu had come to be associated with the so-called anti-globalization movement, wielding his by then significant academic and social standing to voice concerns about the impact of the United States on European political and cultural traditions. At a time when political engagement was unfashionable, Bourdieu was more political than ever (*Acts of Resistance* [1998]); in a culture of celebrity intellectuals, he denounced TV (*On Television* [1996]). Even when he had become arguably France's most powerful and influential intellectual--one of the last of the great French theorists--installed in the prestigious Collège de France, Bourdieu remained a maverick. And it was precisely the complex nature of the connections between social position and political or, more controversially, aesthetic dispositions that lay at the center of much of his work.

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← Bourdieu was a sociologist of culture (and literature) in so far as he always emphasized culture's embeddedness in the social; but he in no way reduced culture to society. Rather, he was interested in the ways in which social struggles are played out in the apparently disinterested realms of (for instance) an art gallery, an opinion poll, a literary salon, or an academic journal. He insisted that, like it or not, critics were always invested in such struggles, and should take account of their investments accordingly. In short, Bourdieu's importance for literary theory and criticism rests above all on his reconfiguration of theories of culture and power, and on his injunctions to critical self-reflexivity.

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← Bourdieu's theoretical positions undoubtedly owe something to his experience of a series of geographical and social displacements. He was born and brought up in a rural community in southwestern France, and then studied Philosophy at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris (like Louis Althusser, he was a student of Georges Canguilhem). After a brief period as a secondary-school teacher, in 1955 he was drafted into military service in then-colonial Algeria and so saw the causes and effects of the Algerian War of Independence at first-hand. He stayed on in Africa, turning to Anthropology and conducting fieldwork among Algeria's various indigenous populations, particularly the Kabyles, before returning to Paris in 1960. This series of movements between geographical extremes, from the provinces to the metropolis and then to colonial outpost, traces a map of social and cultural difference, but within what was notionally a single nation-state (officially, pre-independence Algeria's three *départements* were integral parts of the Republic). In his theoretical work, Bourdieu would be continually concerned with the contradictory unity and inter-dependence of apparently very distinct domains of experience. Algeria, a society whose political transition to independence also entailed new forms of contact and inter-penetration between traditional practices and the modern market economy, served in some ways as a template for his ideas about social change and exchange.

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← Bourdieu's first published book was *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (1958) followed, upon his return to France, by *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (1963) and *Le Déracinement* (1964). Though he would soon turn to the sociology of contemporary France that occupied him for the rest of his career, Algeria remained a presence within his work, as counterpoint, complement, or confirmation, for at least the next two decades. Kabylia became Bourdieu's explicit focus once more in his major theoretical statements *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (1972; thoroughly revised and reworked for its English translation as *Outline of a Theory of Practice* in 1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980), and a significant part even of his late turn to focus on questions of gender in *Masculine Domination* (1998). For he found the key to his analysis of late twentieth-century industrial society in social structures that he himself described as feudal and pre-modern. What he would come to term the "field" of culture obeyed, Bourdieu argued, a logic best understood by comparison with peasants' struggle for status and "symbolic power." The struggle for symbolic power and the competition for cultural distinction alike both functioned according to a system of deferred rewards, cloaked (or "misrecognized") in the language of disinterest.

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← In his description and theorization of Kabyle society, Bourdieu offers an ambitious critique both of structuralist anthropology (typified by Claude Lévi-Strauss) and of approaches influenced by existentialist philosophy (and so by Jean-Paul Sartre). Claiming to go beyond the traditional dichotomy between structure and agency, or between an emphasis on objective conditions and one on the subject's self-determination, Bourdieu draws attention to the role of time, the interval between condition and action that allows for differential strategies to emerge. In particular he reconsiders the classic "gift exchange," which both Marcel Mauss and Lévi-Strauss had famously analyzed. In societies in which a monetary economy, and so the determination of price in terms of exchange value, is not dominant, the exchange of gifts often secures services or goods and thereby also defines and secures social relations. Whereas Mauss had emphasized the subjective experience of such gift-giving (as a voluntary expression of a social relation), Lévi-Strauss had stressed the expectation of reciprocity (one good turn deserving another). Bourdieu resolves the apparent contradiction between good will and self-interest by pointing out that a gift given in return is always delayed; it is thanks to this delay that the gift-giving is experienced as free. Though a gift must be reciprocated, this reciprocation takes place in due time, and perhaps in a different location. But herein lies the (social) artistry: the whole exchange depends on timing, on the counter-gift coming neither too soon nor too late, for fear of making explicit the otherwise implicit, unarticulated rules of social interaction. An immediate counter-gift insults because it lays bare the expectation of reciprocity, while excessive delay suggests neglect or reluctance. Between the two lies all the space of strategy.

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← In modern, Western societies, according to Bourdieu, the field of culture likewise operates according to a disguised logic of deferred interest. The “market of symbolic goods” assigns cultural value to those works, and those authors, that defer immediate returns: “high” art is differentiated from “low” culture with the former’s apparent distance from or denial of temporal rewards. In *The Rules of Art* (1992), Bourdieu’s most sustained examination of literature, he shows how the novelist Gustave Flaubert, among other late nineteenth-century writers, sought to constitute a literary field whose autonomy was defined by its “rupture with the economic order” (121). With the triumph of modernism, literature (and art) would no longer be subject either to financial patronage or to the emerging mass market. A chiasmic pattern is established: those who have symbolic power or cultural status take the stance of rejecting economic reward--and accumulate all the more cultural status as a result--while those whose production is more attuned to economic profit find their cultural standing slips accordingly. However, to emphasize that cultural autonomy inevitably has its limits, and more importantly that cultural status can be converted into financial rewards and *vice versa* (albeit neither automatically nor immediately), Bourdieu designates the results of cultural and economic valorization alike with the same word: they are both forms of “capital,” respectively cultural or financial.

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← Of Bourdieu's contributions to cultural theory, it is the concept of "cultural capital" that has most attracted the attention of literary critics and theorists. In the first instance, this is probably because the term opens up new ways of discussing high and low, "mass" and "elite" cultures without prioritizing either--in other words, avoiding both elitist defenses of high culture and populist celebrations of low culture. The opposition between high and low within the field of culture replicates--or is homologous to--a wider opposition that pits the holders of cultural capital against the holders of financial capital. The latter are, overall, dominant (and comprise the dominant fraction of the dominant class); the former, however, are also part of the dominant class (and comprise its dominated fraction). Beneath both are the dominated class, short of cultural and financial capital alike. In the context of their antagonism towards the holders of financial capital, the dominated fraction of the dominant class--teachers, professors, artists, intellectuals--often ally themselves with the dominated class, articulating (but therefore also misrepresenting) a distinction between forms of capital in ideological terms. Rather than taking either aesthetic or ideological statements on their own terms, however, Bourdieu insists that we should look first at the composition and forms of capital structuring a given field, and then at the competition between agents aiming to secure or maintain their capital reserves (and to secure the dominance of one form of capital over another).

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← Bourdieu argues that society as a whole is composed of a series of more or less autonomous fields--such as the academic field analyzed in *Homo Academicus* (1984), itself sub-divided into fields that take the form of Faculties and disciplines--each of which replicates the fundamental structural distinction between financial and cultural capital, but in its own specific ways and allowing its own repertoire of strategies of consecration or dissent. Bourdieu often uses metaphors or analogies drawn from sports to describe the conflicts that structure each of these fields, to argue for instance that there is a difference between the explicit rules operative in a particular social space and the internalized, implicit rules that determine who is to be the better player in any given contest. Participants tend to internalize and embody these rules (to constitute what Bourdieu terms a "habitus," which operates beneath the level of ideology), such that the difference between subjectivity and objectivity as social agents play the game of culture is as ineffable as is an answer to the question of whether a skilled player follows or controls the ball in a game of tennis.

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← Among literary critics and theorists, Bourdieu's most widely-read work is probably *Distinction* (1979). Here, analyzing responses to a nationwide survey on cultural tastes, he maps the chiasmic division between the holders of cultural and financial capital, and proceeds to outline the distinct (class) habituses that embody different dispositions towards culture itself. Holders of cultural capital embody an aestheticizing disposition that emphasizes (apparent) disinterest by subordinating function to form: they "introduce a distance, a gap [...] by displacing the interest from the 'content,' characters, plot etc., to the form, to the specifically artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity with the work immediately given" (*Distinction* 34). They tend to prefer abstraction and formal complexity to the realism or romanticism of bourgeois and mass market culture. However, here, the salient distinction is that between the dominant class tout court and a dominated class that does not have the luxury of such distance from a world full of real needs and real exigencies. On these grounds, Bourdieu conducts an assault on the Kantian aesthetic and its radical separation of the "beautiful" from the "useful." Kant's "pure" taste, Bourdieu argues, misrecognizes the social relationship that, ironically, the notion itself institutes in distinguishing between those who can afford to defer social interest and those who cannot. Aesthetic "disinterest," however, is anything but: it is a reflex of a horror of the masses, "nothing other than a refusal, a disgust--a disgust for objects which impose enjoyment and a disgust for the crude, vulgar taste which revels in this imposed enjoyment" (*Distinction* 486). It is on similar grounds, in other words for its post-Kantian affirmation of (interested) disinterestedness, that Bourdieu also criticizes the work of Jacques Derrida and, by implication, poststructuralism more generally.

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← Cultural capital breeds cultural capital: in that the aestheticizing disposition emphasizes formal similarities between works of art, it also assumes sufficient familiarity to make establishing similarities viable. (This is a point Bourdieu makes perhaps most forcefully in his early work *The Love of Art* [1969], co-written with Alain Darbel.) Moreover, as he argues in books such as *The Inheritors* (1964) and *Reproduction* (1970), both co-written with Jean-Claude Passeron, the (French) educational system rewards this familiarity garnered through inheritance more effectively than it provides the dominated with tools to surpass their dominated condition. Indeed, schooling tends rather to confirm to the dominated the truth and rectitude of their own domination by naturalizing a familiarity and confidence (confidence, again, to defer immediate interest) itself born of privilege. Because of his sometimes dystopian outlook, Bourdieu is often criticized for his supposed "hyperfunctionalism. In fact, however, his work is premised on social change, on the emergence of new fields and on the diverse and changing strategies that specific agents employ to maintain, convert, or exploit their reserves of cultural or financial capital.

Bourdieu describes cultural fields in terms of a perpetual and multivalent agonism, as agents play the game of cultural distinction and capital accumulation in conditions which (thanks to the temporal delay inherent in the notion of strategy as deferral) are always subtly different from the conditions under which agents' habituses were formed. The expectations generated (and frustrated) by this "hypostasis" of habitus set the scene for more generalized social conflict and unrest: most notably, for Bourdieu, the events of May 1968 should be understood in terms of an expanding educational system's inability to reciprocate the investments of upwardly-mobile students. However, this notion of cultural conflict rarely conforms to the simpler class antagonism that other social critics may discern; indeed, it may seem frustrating in that the essence of the game is that the goalposts keep moving.

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← The theoretical tools that Bourdieu provides--concepts such as "field," "symbolic power," "cultural capital," "habitus" and its "hypostasis" and so on--are immensely powerful and flexible. His approach to the dichotomy between structure and agency, and the associated injunction that critics must also situate themselves as interested players in the game of cultural distinction, are invaluable contributions to problems that have bedeviled literary and cultural theory. At the same time, Bourdieu's work can be peculiarly dogmatic and strangely underdetermined--both of which traits arise from a certain generality, which means for instance that it is not necessarily clear what a Bourdieusian reading of a specific text would entail. It would also be worth pushing some of his more trenchant assertions: perhaps most notably the claim (in *Distinction*) that the dominated can only have a "taste for the necessary," when surely (as parts of his own collection *The Weight of the World* [1993] also suggest) there are whole fields of activity from folk art and rituals to gossip or gang culture that embody a taste for stylization and excess; to claim that the dominated are the creatures only of need is simply an inverted Romanticism. Yet in so far as such problematics can be analyzed fruitfully with tools that Bourdieu himself gives us, this is simply to say that there is room for a "Bourdieu beyond Bourdieu."

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← Bibliography

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← NB dates refer to original French publication where relevant, though quotations are taken from published English translations. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (1958), *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (1963), *Le Déracinement* (1964), *The Inheritors* (with Jean-Claude Passeron, 1964), *The Love of Art* (with Alain Darbel, 1969), *Reproduction* (with Jean-Claude Passeron, 1970), *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (1972), *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), *Distinction* (1979), *The Logic of Practice* (1980), *Homo Academicus* (1984), *The Rules of Art* (1992), *The Weight of the World* (edited, 1993), *On Television* (1996), *Acts of Resistance* (1998), *Masculine Domination* (1998).

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← last updated October 31, 2004

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13/12/2004 22:49:00

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